



# THE BOTTOM LINE

Managing today's concept of foodservice value

*By Emma Balment*

Today's restaurateurs and suppliers are operating in what is being described as 'The Endurance Economy'.<sup>1</sup> Cost of living is the top issue facing Canadians today. Price has become the determining factor for purchase, and consumers are predominantly pessimistic about both short and long-term financial wellbeing. There is hope on the horizon as consumer confidence begins to stabilize,<sup>2</sup> but personal financial outlook has been eroding for the past decade.

How do restaurateurs provide compelling value and compete in a price-first economy? The good news is that restaurants are an enduring part of Canadians' everyday lives, but the more uncomfortable truth is that it feels like the industry is working furiously just to stand still. As the margins for error are as thin as the margins for profit, there can be no wasted effort.

Customers are strategically managing what they spend on food and beverage but can still be enticed to choose restaurants over the more economically defensible home-cooked meal. Moderate year-over-year traffic growth of two per cent and dollar growth of five per cent hide complex currents of change that keep traffic and spend on the upswing at foodservice. These trends indicate how consumers simultaneously seek practical value and affordability alongside less tangible social, emotional, and experiential benefits.<sup>3</sup>

### Trading down and trading out

Full-service restaurants (FSRs) are under fire during times of economic constraint as they have the highest average eater cheques. However, in 2026, FSRs are in a better position to protect their traffic flow because the restaurant customer has aged. FSRs' more mature, economically secure guests are protected from (but not immune to) the Endurance Economy.

FSR operators find guests making concessions: the costly dinner hour may be slower, but daytime traffic more than compensates. Dining rooms are quieter, but more orders are going out the door. As such, dollar growth is driven entirely by traffic as customers resist spending more per visit.

Dinner occasions instead trade down to quick-service restaurants (QSRs). QSR operators have invested decades in preimmunizing their offer to make a competitive bid against FSRs. Customers agree it's better to go to a nicer QSR than to stay home altogether for dinner. But on the same note, the cheap n' cheerful breakfast, lunch, and snack occasions trade down and out. As such, top chains are relying more on their power to promote good deals with combos, value menus, and daily specials to protect their traffic.

While QSRs were upping their game to compete with FSRs, convenience stores and grocers were investing to fill the void on hot, fresh, and affordable fast food. These segments show the greatest incremental traffic growth for foodservice in the past year, and they're not doing it with packaged goods for immediate consumption, they're doing it with fresh items that compete directly with QSR favourites.

### Social connection and cultural exploration

The value of restaurants lies not just in balancing the price to quality ratio of products and services. Restaurants are an ingrained part of Canadian — and human — culture. Choosing a restaurant for reasons like craving, hunger, and convenience are less compelling, but choosing restaurants for social connection and cultural exploration are reasons to keep coming back. These trends go beyond special occasions and spicy food.

Consumers are strategically adapting how they use restaurants to help them spend time and bond with family and friends. Social connec-



**ELEVATE YOUR MENU  
WITH U.S.-GROWN RICE.**

- ✓ *High quality*
- ✓ *Versatile*
- ✓ *Cost-effective*
- ✓ *Gluten-free*

Learn more at [riceinfo.com](http://riceinfo.com).



tion occasions are typically reserved for FSR dining rooms, but younger customers are changing the status quo for the appropriate use of foodservice for these occasions, saving a buck ordering in or taking out from FSRs. They'll use QSRs to meet over a coffee or a quirky drive-thru date: retail foodservice is the hot new caterer. The younger generation has decided to keep it casual rather than to avoid foodservice for social occasions altogether.

Furthermore, each new generation of foodservice customer has changed the status quo for expectation for their cultural diversity to be reflected on menus. Palates are more adventurous and in search of new and authentic tastes from around the world. Restaurants have always had the advantage when attracting explorative foodies, and now there are more of them to go around.

The need for a good price does drive up comfort food classics like burgers and fried chicken. Entrées with higher price points offer more value if they can meet needs for cultural exploration and trying something new. In turn, those global flavours have become the basis for many limited time offers of fast-food favourites that add spice to familiar burgers, sandwiches, pizza, and friend chicken, making it even easier to fulfil the need for a unique experience. In 2026, the new frontier for flavour expands from Chinese, Thai, and Japanese into Korean, Middle Eastern, and South Asian.

### Adapting rather than reacting

The affordability problem is not going away any time soon: operators, suppliers, and marketers are required to adapt, rather than to react. If we manage affordability like a short-term crisis with a box of bandages and a book of coupons, we will fall short. The industry needs to make strategic and intentional changes to help consumers endure this extended period of constraint. Restaurateurs can be successful and provide value in how they offer goods and services that provide financial accessibility and offer emotional and social permissibility to avoid having to merely do without. 🎯

**Emma Balment**, Director, Ipsos, Market Strategy and Understanding, Food and Beverage Group, has dedicated her career to supplying major brands in the Food and Beverage industry with the consumer insights they need to develop competitive strategies. Leveraging a team of industry experts and powerful syndicated data sets such as the FIVE Consumption Tracker, and the Foodservice Monitor, Emma specializes in uncovering growth opportunities for manufacturers, retailers, and foodservice operators by providing a deep understanding of their consumer and competitive landscape.

#### Sources:

1. Ipsos, *Endurance Economy Insights Hub*, 2026, <https://www.ipsos.com/en-ca/endurance-economy-insights-hub>
2. Ipsos, *Consumer Confidence*, March 2026, <https://www.ipsos.com/en-ca/consumer-confidence-canada-monthly-update>
3. Ipsos *Foodservice Monitor*, rolling twelve months ending December 2025

# Cooke FOOD SERVICE+

CUSTOMIZED SOLUTIONS THAT ALIGN WITH YOUR UNIQUE NEEDS, ENSURING YOU GET THE RIGHT SEAFOOD, AT THE RIGHT TIME, IN THE RIGHT QUANTITIES.

## ATLANTIC SALMON

Proudly Canadian raised in the highest tides in the world, in the Bay of Fundy. Resulting in **low food miles** here in North America, **consistent supply** 52 weeks a year and always fresh.

Available in:  
DHON | Fillets | Portions



## READY-TO-COOK

These items are perfect **labour savers** for a busy kitchen offering consistent **portion control** and assists with managing **less waste**.

Whole Muscle Kabobs  
Formed Kabobs | Burgers  
Portions | Seasoned Portions



## READY-TO-EAT

Save time and add versatility to your menu offerings with ready-to-eat options!

Cold Smoked Salmon  
Cold Smoked Trout  
Hot Smoked Salmon  
Hot Smoked Candied Bites



## MENU TREND ALERT!

In 2026, expect to see more salmon menu items featuring innovative flavour pairings—think smoked salmon with herbs and maple, spicy jalapeno or chipotle glazes, sweet and savoury combinations and globally inspired marinades—reflecting both the evolving palate of Canadian diners.

Source: Mintel

VIEW OUR  
FULL PRODUCT  
CATALOGUE

